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Panamanian, Denying Charges, Says He Won't Quit

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PANAMA, June 17 — The commander of the Panamanian Army denied all charges of involvement in criminal activities today and brushed aside calls from the opposition for his resignation.

In an interview, the commander, Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, insisted that he and the army would continue to play a major role, together with the civilian President, in running the country. But General Noriega is widely seen as the true wielder of political power in the country and the army has either imposed or deposed the last five presidents.

"The role of the defense force in this country is different from any other armed forces," General Noriega said. "Here the President of the republic, who rules and takes decisions, is a friend of ours. We are his subaltern and his support. We've learned to walk together."

General Noriega contended that he was the victim of a political campaign by his enemies in Panama who, he said, had manipulated American officials and news organizations to join in attacks against him. He added, however, that he did not expect relations between the United States and Panama to be affected by the accusations.

In a communiqué today, the Panamanian Government said it was satisfied with the clarification of United States policy toward Panama delivered Monday by the United States Ambassador here.

General Noriega denied repeatedly that either he or the Panamanian Army as an institution had ever been involved in drug running, money laundering and espionage for Cuba or had helped leftist Colombian guerrillas. The charges, quoting several American officials, have been reported by NBC News and in articles in The New York Times.

General Noriega said; "The article that the paper you are part of proceeded in a totally unaccustomed form from that which you could consider a free press in a democratic country. You don't mention any official. In the presentation you mention sources, unidentified officials. But this isn't presented in the truth of justice or else it would be immediately invalidated."

General Noriega added that he believed his political opponents had planted the article in the United States in order to have it reprinted in Panamanian newspapers to damage him politically.

"It's a fight to get political power," the general said of the accusations.

Colombian Rebel Tie Denied

Speaking of reports of Panamanian support for Colombian leftist guerrillas, he said: "There has never existed any official tie, nor does it exist, with any group of guerrillas or armed groups. There has never been official protection for any armed group against Colombia."

General Noriega also denied army involvement in the killing last September of Hugo Spadafora, a leading critic of the army.

Costa Rican Government investigators and Mr. Spadafora's family contend that Mr. Spadafora was killed in Panama after being detained by the Panamanian Army. His beheaded body was found the next day just inside Costa Rica.

Asked about the killing, General Noriega said, "I ask you who has been hurt by the death of Spadafora," suggesting that he himself had been the one most damaged.

He added that the army was still investigating Mr. Spadafora's death and that it had "further details" to look into.

Air Service Closed Down

The general said the army could not be engaged in money laundering because bank transactions and banking regulations were outside of its control.

Replying to a specific charge by American officials that a Panamanian air service known as Inair Airline was used for laundering drug money, General Noriega contended that the Panamanian Army in fact had closed down Inair Airline last year because of suspicions it was involved in running drug money and that the army had informed United States officials of this. His account could not immediately be confirmed.

On the charges of drug running, General Noriega said that army had worked closely with the United States Drug Enforcement Agency Administration. "They are the best witnesses of the honesty and effort of our work," he said.

"The problem isn't Manuel Antonio Noriega," the army commander added. "He is a man in time and space. The philosophy of the defense forces is to be developmentalist and to be united with the people. There will be plans to destabilize by those who don't have power and want power."

The accusations against General Noriega have created a political furor in Panama, with opposition parties calling for his resignation and for an investigation of the charges against him.

But the opposition is weak and divided and appears unable to muster the popular backing or the leadership to challenge the ruling alliance of the army and a number of political parties and trade unions.

The pro-Government press and ruling Democratic Revolutionary Party today replied to demands for General Noriega's resignation by charging that opposition groups were plotting a coup.

General Noriega said he did not know why American officials would make strong accusations against him, but speculated that it might be a maneuver to put pressure on Panama on a number of issues, including eventual control of the Panama Canal.

"This is all one package of actions," he said, referring to the accusations by American officials and opposition calls for his departure.

The general, who is 47 years old and has served in the army for 23 years, said accusations that he or the army had turned American secrets over to Cuban intelligence "appear as a poorly written spy novel."